

CONFIGURATION FOR DOCKABLE PORTABLE COMPUTERS USING A
SINGLE ETHERNET PHYSICAL LAYER CHIP AND TRANSFORMER

Inventor(s):

Jitendra Mohan
2793 Glorietta Circle
Santa Clara
Santa Clara County
California 95051
Citizen of India

Assignee:

NATIONAL SEMICONDUCTOR CORPORATION
2900 Semiconductor Drive
Santa Clara, California 95051

William A. Munck
Daniel E. Venglarik
DAVIS MUNCK, P.C.
900 Three Galleria Tower
13155 Noel Road
Dallas, Texas 75240
(972) 628-3600

CONFIGURATION FOR DOCKABLE PORTABLE COMPUTERS USING A
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TECHNICAL FIELD OF THE INVENTION

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[0001] The present invention is directed, in general, to mobile computer systems and docking stations and, more specifically, to selective connection of mobile computers to a network either directly or through a docking station.

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

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[0002] Many new portable (or, equivalently, "laptop," "palm-top" or "mobile") computers include built-in Ethernet connections supporting 10/100/1000 mega-bits per second (Mbps) base data transfer rates on a twisted pair transmission medium (commonly referred to as 10/100/1000 Base-T or 10/100/1000BT). Such portable computers may selectively connect to a docking station or port replicator providing easy access to full-size peripherals (monitor, keyboard, mouse, etc.) together with a fixed Ethernet network connection.

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[0003] As illustrated in FIGURES 3A and 3B, network connections both through the docking station to the mobile computer and directly into the mobile computer are

currently supported by either (a) providing a 10/100/1000BT media access control (MAC) and physical layer (PHY) integrated circuit in both the mobile computer and the docking station, or (b) employing a switch integrated circuit (IC) within the mobile computer to demultiplex the output of a single MAC-PHY IC (in the mobile computer), together with two transformers to ensure that the MAC-PHY IC sees only one transmission path at any given time and that problems relating to reflections from the unterminated (open or unused) network connections are thereby eliminated.

[0004] Both solutions incur the expense of duplicate or redundant components. Moreover, signal integrity suffers with use of a switch IC due to nonlinear switch resistance and/or parasitic capacitances, particularly when driving a signal over the power supply rail, and especially for 1000BT operation (with 100BT operation suffering some signal integrity loss and 10BT operation not significantly affected).

[0005] There is, therefore, a need in the art for enabling use of a single MAC-PHY integrated circuit to provide a network connection both directly into a mobile computer and through a docking station, without duplication

of components and without significant loss of signal integrity at higher transmission rates.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

[0006] For a more complete understanding of the present invention, and the advantages thereof, reference is now made to the following descriptions taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings, wherein like numbers designate like objects, and in which:

[0007] FIGURE 1 depicts a block diagram for a mobile computer and docking station using a single Ethernet physical layer chip and transformer according to one embodiment of the present invention;

[0008] FIGURE 2 depicts in greater detail a configuration for selective connection of a mobile computer to an Ethernet network either directly or through a docking station using a single Ethernet physical layer chip and transformer according to one embodiment of the present invention; and

[0009] FIGURE 3A and 3B illustrate current configurations for selective connection of a mobile computer to an Ethernet network either directly or through a docking station.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE INVENTION

[0010] To address the above-discussed deficiencies of the prior art, it is a primary object of the present invention to provide, for use in a dockable mobile computer, a single 10/100/1000BT Ethernet network physical layer chip and a single transformer, both within the mobile computer, that are employed to provide a network connection to the mobile computer either through a network connection interface within a docking station receiving the mobile computer, when the mobile computer is docked, or through a network connection interface within the mobile computer, when the mobile computer is not docked. Connection traces to the unused network connection interface have the characteristics of a small, unterminated stub, with any reflections handled by intrinsic echo cancellation during 1000BT operation and negligible during 10/100BT operation.

[0011] The foregoing has outlined rather broadly the features and technical advantages of the present invention so that those skilled in the art may better understand the detailed description of the invention that follows. Additional features and advantages of the invention will be described hereinafter that form the subject of the claims of the invention. Those skilled in the art will appreciate

that they may readily use the conception and the specific embodiment disclosed as a basis for modifying or designing other structures for carrying out the same purposes of the present invention. Those skilled in the art will also

5 realize that such equivalent constructions do not depart from the spirit and scope of the invention in its broadest form.

[0012] Before undertaking the detailed description below, it may be advantageous to set forth definitions of

10 certain words or phrases used throughout this patent document: the terms "include" and "comprise," as well as derivatives thereof, mean inclusion without limitation; the term "or" is inclusive, meaning and/or; the phrases "associated with" and "associated therewith," as well as

15 derivatives thereof, may mean to include, be included within, interconnect with, contain, be contained within, connect to or with, couple to or with, be communicable with, cooperate with, interleave, juxtapose, be proximate to, be bound to or with, have, have a property of, or the

20 like; and the term "controller" means any device, system or part thereof that controls at least one operation, whether such a device is implemented in hardware, firmware, software or some combination of at least two of the same. It should be noted that the functionality associated with

any particular controller might be centralized or distributed, whether locally or remotely. Definitions for certain words and phrases are provided throughout this patent document, and those of ordinary skill in the art will understand that such definitions apply in many, if not most, instances to prior as well as future uses of such defined words and phrases.

[0013] FIGURES 1 and 2, discussed below, and the various embodiments used to describe the principles of the present invention in this patent document are by way of illustration only and should not be construed in any way to limit the scope of the invention. Those skilled in the art will understand that the principles of the present invention may be implemented in any suitably arranged device.

[0014] FIGURE 1 depicts a block diagram for a mobile computer and docking station using a single Ethernet physical layer chip and transformer according to one embodiment of the present invention. Those skilled in the art will recognize that the full construction and operation of a mobile computer is not depicted and described. Instead, for simplicity and clarity, only so much of a mobile computer as is unique to the present invention or

necessary for an understanding of the present invention is depicted or described.

[0015] Mobile computer system 100 includes mobile computer 101 containing a processor 102, main memory 103, and bridges 104 and 105 enable the processor 101 to interface with other system elements. Processor 101 employs a memory controller host or "north bridge" 104 to interface with main memory 103 and graphics units (not shown). Processor 101 employs an interface controller host or "south bridge" 105, coupled to the north bridge 104 by a hub interface, to interface with other devices over standard, general-purpose buses such as a Peripheral Component Interconnect (PCI) bus.

[0016] Mobile computer 101 is configured for selective connection to a docking station 106 (as used herein, "docking station" is intended to include port replicators) using physical and electrical connectors in accordance with the known art. Mobile computer 101 includes a connector, described in further detail below, for wired connection to an Ethernet network through, for example, a card within a PCI bus slot coupled to south bridge 105. Alternatively mobile computer 101, when docked in docking station 106, is connected to an Ethernet network through the docking

station 106, also through the same card within the PCI us slot.

[0017] FIGURE 2 depicts in greater detail a configuration for selective connection of a mobile computer to an Ethernet network either directly or through a docking station using a single Ethernet physical layer chip and transformer according to one embodiment of the present invention. A single Ethernet MAC-PHY chip 201 within mobile computer 101 is employed for network connection both directly and through the docking station 106. In addition, only a single transformer 202 is employed, and no switch integrated circuit is necessary. The present invention thus does away with the switch IC and one of the transformers for the implementation in FIGURE 3B.

[0018] The pins of the physical layer chip 201, which are sensitive to parasitic capacitances, are connected to a transformer 202. The secondary of the transformer 202 is routed directly to an interface 203 within the mobile computer 101 to a Category 5 (CAT-5) transmission medium, such as a RJ-45 connector, as well as to the docking connector 204. The docking connector 204 is, in turn, also connector to a CAT-5 transmission medium interface 205. The interfaces 203 and 205 are then used to drive signals

over up to 100 meters (m) of CAT-5 cable to a network packet switch or router.

[0019] Use of a single physical layer chip 201 and transformer 202 in the manner described above is possible for 1000BT operation for several reasons. First, when the mobile computer 101 is not docked, the connection traces 206 between the docking connector 204 and the signal lines 207 between transformer 202 and interface 203 have the characteristics of a small stub. Since 1000BT physical layer implementations are echo canceled systems (i.e., full duplex with reflection cancellation) under the Ethernet standard, reflections resulting from the unterminated stub can be handled without performance degradation.

[0020] Second, while the connection traces 206 combine with the docking connector 204 and connection traces 208 within the docking station 106 to form a longer stub when the mobile computer 101 is docked, the network connection when the mobile computer 101 is docked is presumed to be through the docking station 106. Transmission mismatches in the through direction thus become part of the cable plant, and can be handled by the adaptive equalizer present in the far end receiver (not shown). When the mobile computer 101 is docked, the portion of signal lines 207 between interface 203 and the connection points for

connection traces 206 has the characteristics of a small, unterminated stub.

[0021] For 10/100BT operation, different wires are used for transmit and receive, such that the system is not very sensitive to echo or near end crosstalk (NEXT). Even if reflection cancellation is not enabled, 10/100BT signaling is not full duplex, so reflections are not a significant problem. In addition, 10/100BT operation provides more signal margin.

[0022] Docking station 106 may optionally include impedance compensation 208 within the signal path between docking connector 204 and interface 205. If an RJ-45 connector is employed for interface 205, impedance compensation 208 may be necessary near the interface 205 to meet Institute for Electrical and Electronics Engineers (IEEE) specifications for RJ-45 connectors in view of the return loss created by long traces within docking station 106 and docking connector discontinuities. Impedance compensation 208 may be implemented by a full inductive-capacitive network, a transformer, or other passive components such as a capacitive network.

[0023] Since the switch IC that only enables one path at a time in the embodiment of FIGURE 3B is eliminated, the case when a cable is plugged in to both RJ-45 connectors

203 and 205 should be detected by the system 100 and a warning issued to remove one of the cables for the system to function correctly.

[0024] The present invention allows a single physical layer chip and a single transformer to be employed by a mobile computer for connection to a network either directly from the mobile computer, when the mobile computer is not docked, or through a docking station, when the mobile computer is docked. Reflection cancellation enabled in 1000BT operation handles reflections resulting from the unterminated stub, while adaptive equalization at the far end receiver handles transmission mismatches. 10BT and 100BT operation is not full duplex, so reflections do not present a significant problem if reflection cancellation is not enabled.

[0025] Although the present invention has been described in detail, those skilled in the art will understand that various changes, substitutions, variations, enhancements, nuances, gradations, lesser forms, alterations, revisions, improvements and knock-offs of the invention disclosed herein may be made without departing from the spirit and scope of the invention in its broadest form.